

Mr. John Spear's Report to the Local Government Board on the Sanitary Condition of Shadwell, in the Rural Sanitary District of Wetherby, Yorkshire.

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Medical Department,
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This inquiry relates to Shadwell, a suburb, as it has been called, of Leeds, and was instituted chiefly with the view of ascertaining the sanitary circumstances of houses, erected as suburban houses, in a district where no building regulations were, at the time of their erection, in operation. Shadwell is situated on an elevated and picturesque site on the north-west boundary of Leeds borough, in the Wetherby Union. The geological formation is the sandstone of the coal-measures, underlying beds of variable thickness of loose shale and clay.

Urban powers were granted to the township in 1878, and in that year building byelaws were adopted. But shortly before this time, speculative builders, it is said from Leeds, had recognised the favourable circumstances of the site for building operations, and had commenced a work that, as I shall show, can scarcely fail to prove of permanent mischief to the interests of the district concerned.

The township has an area of 1,240 acres, and a population now estimated at 650; the enumerated population in 1871 having been 454 only. It consists of the old village street, and of new houses; the latter erected mostly in rows at considerable distances from each other, so that the population is still essentially a scattered one. It is with the new houses that this Report mainly deals.

Nearest to Leeds, close by the boundary of the parish, is a row of houses built before the passing of the byelaws, and known as Valley Terrace. The houses are of nine rooms, and each has its stable and coach-house. The stable is built against the kitchen wall, having "a T fall roof" from the latter, and, if occupied, is calculated to become a nuisance. The buildings afford many evidences of hasty construction and careless workmanship. The drainage is by cesspool (with the exception of two houses at a lower level, which appear to drain into a brook); each cesspool being in the middle of the garden, away from the houses, and either unventilated or uncovered, and in the latter state forming, as is to be supposed, a dangerous pitfall. These cesspools are either emptied into the gardens or the filth is allowed to soak away or overflow, according to the habits of the householder, and the circumstances of the cesspit construction. Offensive smells were noticed to come from some of the drain-gullies close by the kitchen doors, the drains being probably ill-constructed. The privies and ashpits, 12 yards from the back doors, are of the ordinary middenstead class. Drinking-water must be fetched from a "dip well" that is fed by a spring from the side of a hill, on the top of which other houses, with overflowing cesspools, are placed. The "dip well" is unprotected from surface washings, although many people resort to it for water. From the houses it is situated at a distance varying from 90 to 200 yards, and is moreover difficult of access. The back yards are unenclosed and unpaved. The rent of these houses is said to be properly 35*l.* per annum; but they appear to be mostly let to tenants of a class different from that originally intended; and, I was told, at a much reduced rental.

The houses of the next row, Hawthorne Terrace, are somewhat smaller, and have no stables. In wet weather, it is said, their unpaved front yards or gardens are flooded. Their cesspools are not ventilated, unless the stone

covers happen to be gone; and the contents are allowed to soak away or overflow. The drinking-water to which these houses have access is the same as that which supplies Valley Terrace; and it has to be carried by hand up a very steep bank, a distance of 240 yards. The houses, like those previously referred to, were evidently built in the hope of immediate sale; and efficiency of drainage and wholesomeness of water supply, being matters requiring skilled advice and some outlay, and matters, likewise, often overlooked by the unwary householder, were, in the absence of strict supervision by a public authority, ignored by the builder.

Further on is a block of smaller houses. They also were built before the passing of the byelaws, and in the hope apparently of attracting a better class of tenant; but in such a way that they already show signs of structural disrepair. They are said to have been built in a swamp, and their foundations to have had no proper preparation; and the evidence of dampness that some of them exhibit goes to corroborate this statement. The sewage from them runs by drain-pipes into a roadside ditch and creates a nuisance, and even this objectionable means of drainage does not sometimes operate, owing to the defective construction of the drain; certain of the yards at the time of my inspection, yards always unpaved and filthy, were flooded with sewage from this cause. The drain, moreover, in some cases, opens directly into the houses. The privy-middens, placed in close proximity to the back doors and windows, are of the most defective construction, and have come to be abominably neglected. Drinking-water is not provided, but has to be fetched from a road-side spring at a distance of 120 yards from the nearest, and 220 yards from the farthest, end of the row.

The Sanitary Authority complain much that these houses were erected at a time when they could exert no control over the building operations, and that the neglect of ordinary sanitary requirements in the first instance now causes infinite trouble; but I saw certain houses that had been erected *since* the passing of the byelaws which also failed in many respects to show intelligent application of the sanitary provisions that the byelaws are meant to enforce. For example, cesspools, the only mode of drainage in operation, serve as mere intercepting or precipitating tanks, and are built with that evident intention. The effluent liquid from these tanks will be even more offensive than the influent, because more advanced in putrefaction; but the manner in which the overflow is usually disposed of (by soakage into the adjacent soil or into the nearest watercourse) shows that this fact is not borne in mind. These cesspools, too, such as they are, are usually not ventilated; privies are often in too close proximity to dwellings (in one case an ordinary privy-midden being, it may be said, under the roof of the dwelling), and are usually most defectively constructed.

This later laxity of administration would seem to be in some sense related to the departure in previous years from sound principles of building construction. Imitation is never more marked than in building operations. Almost every new district forms for itself, as it were, a standard dwelling; and if this standard be a low or vicious one, its evils are almost sure to be perpetuated. The local builders are charmed with the devices for the saving of expense which their speculative colleague has revealed to them; and any subsequent attempt by the authority to suppress objectionable practices, the discontinuance of which involves expense, is vehemently resented as an attack upon the trade. A "jerry-house," with its unpaved and damp surroundings, its sewage nuisances, its deficiency of wholesome water supply, has already become an accustomed, and in some sense a tolerated, sight in the district; and a wholly new departure, involving fresh principles of building construction, such as an efficient administration of byelaws necessitates, is found to be most difficult.

Such experience, however, so far from showing the limited value of building byelaws, exemplifies, on the contrary, only the danger of their early absence or neglect. In many respects the provisions of the Public Health Act do not suffice to secure proper construction of houses in rapidly growing parts of rural sanitary districts. The Wetherby Rural Sanitary Authority, complaining of what was done before it had urban powers—and complaining not about Shadwell only, but about Clifford-cum-Boston, where the "byelaws were obtained after the mischief was done"—can yet witness at

the present moment the following state of things in another parish within its district, for which such urban powers have not yet even been applied for. In the Wigtown parish, on the borders of the Shadwell township, a row of houses is in course of erection. These houses, sixteen in number, are (or were at the time of my inspection), although unfinished, with one exception, fully occupied. They are built, in chief part, on the site of an old and now filled up clay pit. In some of them water, said by the occupants to stink, stands a foot deep in the cellars and underground passages. House-yards are not even formed; and the privies, mere cesspits, so constructed as to be incapable of thorough scavenging, stand in a sea of mud. Some of these privies are absolutely inaccessible to the tenants (indeed, in the case of several houses, no steps even are provided by which the tenants can descend from their back doors), and the solid and liquid refuse is consequently thrown from the doors on to the surface. Close by, between the houses and the privies, and sunk with the latter in the porous soil, is the well—one to each house—a shallow dip-well roughly lined with stone. At the time of my visit improvement was being attempted here: the cellars were being cemented, in order, if possible, to keep the water out; the wells, it was said, were to be deepened and lined with brickwork, and the privy floors to be raised above the surface; yards were to be formed and paved; and some sort of drainage (there is none whatever at present), by which sewage would be carried into a roadside ditch in the Shadwell township, was to be provided. But even if all this be done, the wholesomeness of these dwellings has already been seriously compromised; the ground around has become fouled with sewage; while the wells, now fed exclusively by surface soakage, will always be liable to contamination from that source, and can consequently never be expected to give a water supply at all safe for dietetic purposes.

JOHN SPEAR.

Recommendations.

1. To prevent further extension of the injury which the district has already suffered from the uncontrolled operations of builders, the Sanitary Authority should, as early as practicable, apply to the Local Government Board for urban powers for such parishes in the Union as are likely to become the seat of building operations, with the object of framing byelaws for such parishes on the model of those issued for the purpose by the Local Government Board.

2. The byelaws at present in force in certain districts of the Union, being deficient in several particulars, especially in regulations concerning the construction, situation, and cleansing of privies, ashpits, and cesspools, require revision. For these districts also it is desirable that the byelaws should be framed on the model of those issued by the Board.

3. All byelaws regulating building operations should, in all parts of the district, be strictly enforced.

4. Meantime, the enactments of the Public Health (Water) Act, 1878, with respect to the provision of a wholesome water supply conveniently accessible to each dwelling, should be carried into effect; and the provisions of the Public Health Act, 1875, against nuisances should be enforced.

5. As to the water supply, the mains of the Leeds Corporation probably offer the most ready and certainly the most satisfactory source for at least a part of the district. As to the drainage, for the larger collections of dwellings at least, the Authority should endeavour to abolish the system of cesspools that now obtains, applying, under skilled advice, the sewage to the land. The new houses in the Wigtown parish should, as a condition of their occupation, be required to possess a sufficient supply of wholesome water. Effectual drainage of these should be required under the provisions of section 23 of the Public Health Act.

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